Knowledge Preserved, Knowledge Lost:
The Selection of Texts in Antiquity

Rector Magnificus, Deans, Colleagues, Students, Family and Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Communal identities are constantly being renewed. In this process the transfer of knowledge plays a major role. Knowledge is also the subject that the two lectures this afternoon have in common. Professor Amirav will be talking about the collection and arrangement of knowledge; I shall focus on the selection of knowledge. As Amirav's lecture will build on mine, I will be speaking first.

A friend of mine once received a two-week subscription to the tabloid *De Telegraaf* as a gift from a neighbour who went on holiday. As the two weeks progressed, he started to feel less and less safe on the streets. He was reading so many reports of robberies and theft, that he began to see problems everywhere. Had the subscription lasted longer, he might also have become part of the 'permanently dissatisfied' readership of this newspaper.

This story illustrates that even a medium produced by a collective makes choices from the supply of data. Not only do two newspapers bring the same news in different ways, they actually also bring different news. I am sure you will readily agree that for newspapers with a clear identity, this is natural, even though we are not always aware of it. What I would like to argue here is that in the formation of traditions—a collective process over a longer period of time—selection is also an important factor. There is still no consensus about this: we often find expressions such as 'the stream of tradition' (Oppenheim 1977, 13; Van der Toorn 2007, 25–26), as if it is meandering forth of necessity, without a clear goal.

Selection and the Making of Ignorance

The problem of selection is that the concept does have the positive connotation of conservation, whereas there is also a negative side to it. By choosing one thing, one is neglecting the other. This is a point for which scholars have requested more attention lately. In my youth in primary school children who could learn well would be called *Professor in de Weetnietkunde*, 'Professor of I-do-not-know Science', but now this field really exists: it was christened *agnotology* (Proctor 2008). Robert Proctor, one of the pioneers of this field, which deals with the question of why we do not know certain things, distinguishes three types of ignorance: first, ignorance as a starting-point, the situation before the time we found out something; secondly, ignorance as the result of conscious intervention—an active construct—as created for instance by the 'doubt industry' financed by the cigarette lobby in the last century and the climate sceptics of today. More than half of all Americans seems to think that global warming does not exist or at least has not been caused by human behaviour. The third form of ignorance, on which I will focus this afternoon, is more subtle and therefore often overlooked: ignorance through loss of knowledge. Loss of knowledge, not because we intended to forget something,

but because we chose to remember something else instead. This form of ignorance is a passive construct rather than an active one.

Assyrian Royal Inscriptions

A good example of the second form, the active construct, which omits or hides unwelcome information intentionally, is found in the Assyrian royal inscriptions. They did not like to admit defeat. Occasionally they just omitted a defeat, but more often they threw dust in their readers' eyes by cross-linking the story with that of another battle, which ended in victory. And it also happened that they brazenly presented the defeat as its opposite, boasting of a resounding victory. The blunt reversal of a fact is still a favourite trope of rulers. On the 15th of June, 1961, the East German leader Walter Ulbricht declared: 'Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten!' And you guessed it: two months later, the first stone was laid. Whoever has no other information is easily deceived by this kind of disinformation, but if other such data is available, then the tendentious nature of the source is usually identified without problem. When in his *Life of Constantine* Eusebius of Caesarea gives the impression that the Roman Emperor Constantine had only three sons, this is not because he did not know that there was a fourth one. On the contrary, he did mention him in the earlier versions of his *Church History*. But he knew that the emperor would not be pleased to see his son Crispus, whom Constantine himself had executed, being mentioned. In the last edition of the *Church History*, preserved in Syriac, and in the *Life of Constantine,* Crispus has become a *unperson* as Orwell would have said (Barnes 2014, 5).

Babylonian Chronicles and Astronomical Diaries

It is a lot harder to find out on what grounds the Babylonian Chronicles selected and presented material. These texts seem to have no problem in admitting Babylonian defeat. At first sight there is no divine intervention in history either. Not only Kirk Grayson, a specialist in this field, but also a rather critical author like John Van Seters, states that these texts had no other purpose than to provide a careful record of the past. There would have been a real academic tradition, a mere antiquarian interest without any propagandistic intent on behalf of the king (Grayson 1975, 11, 14; Van Seters 1997, 79–92).

In order to answer the question of the selection of material it will probably be best to look at the direct sources of these records: the so-called Astronomical Diaries. After all, the Chronicles appear to be extracted from these. In the extracts the emphasis is on the political and military facts. The Diaries present a wider array: astronomical data, prices of goods, water levels, and news in the category of 'man bites dog', miscarriages, and other remarkable phenomena (cf. Van der Spek 1993). Why the extracts were made has not been determined yet, but the function of the Diaries seems obvious. The Babylonian scholars gathered 'big data' in order to determine the relationship between astronomical data and events on earth and hence also to make predictions about the future. They were in all respects similar to our macroeconomists. Yet whereas these often have to admit having overlooked some parameters, to the Babylonian scholars *everything* was important. What happens on earth is determined by the gods and therefore recorded in the stars, whether it is the fall of a king, the next grain harvest or phe-

nomena such as ‘five dogs approach one bitch’. The apparent objectivity is therefore related to the purpose: whoever wants to use data for analysis and prediction, wants pure data which has not been tampered with.

Yet this is not the whole story. It does indeed seem that the scholars could not care less about who won and who lost a battle. But there was something they did find important: the continuity of the temple service. Whoever reads these texts well will notice that kings are indeed assessed on the basis of one clear criterion: did the temple service continue without being disturbed or not? This fact does not really come as a surprise: the scholars who wrote these texts were after all attached to the temple. Each organization tends to maintain itself, and the more people depend on it, the stronger this tendency will grow. Compare this with the Dutch civil service during the Second World War: many officials were concerned in the first place about the continuation of their usual processes and procedures.

Thus for the Astronomical Diaries the Babylonian scholars selected information which was important for the temple and its endeavour to predict the future. Details of military campaigns were considered as irrelevant as the everyday life of Babylonian citizens (although data on market prices do give us an idea of the availability of food, for example). So we have ‘big data’, but they do represent a very specific selection. Why a further selection was made for the Babylonian Chronicles remains guesswork. But I can imagine that the scholars, thinking about their own interests, wished to teach the king about his predecessors, for which purpose the political and military data were adequate, whereas especially in reports on takeovers and usurpation the continuation of the temple service was strongly emphasized.

Alexandrian Scholarship

Very different types of selection can be found in the third century BCE, at the beginning of the Hellenistic era. It is tempting to think that the huge changes resulting from Alexander’s conquests and the increased contact with other peoples—one could even speak of globalization—brought about some sense of urgency in collecting, selecting, and editing traditional texts. In any case particularly the Ptolemies, the successors of Alexander the Great who ruled over Egypt and part of the Levant, invested enormously in the collection of literature and set up an important library. Alexandria in Egypt became a centre for the philological study of earlier Greek literature and started to work as a magnet to writers, scholars, and manuscripts from Greece.

In Alexandria they did not just write catalogues of all that was in the library, the *pinakes*, but for every genre they also selected the authors they found normative, the *enkrithentes* ‘the authors admitted after examination’. In Latin they later called them ‘first class authors’, the *classici*—hence our word ‘classic’ (Pfeiffer 1968, 204–208). For these selective lists, the Greeks had no separate term, but from the seventeenth century onwards scholars started using a Greek word for them that has been used since the time of Constantine for another selective list of texts: the list of books that we now know as the Bible. I am referring to the word ‘canon’, which literally means yardstick, and figuratively guideline.

For the books of the Hebrew Bible, the criterion for selection would seem to be obvious: they had to be ancestral, inspired writings (cf. the Prologue to Ben Sira). But the establishment of a criterion does not mean that one agrees on the application. Even in Rabbinic Judaism, which became normative later on, the second century CE still saw discussions on books such as Esther and Song of Songs.

There is no absolute certainty on the criteria which the Alexandrian scholars applied to Greek literature. Interestingly, the 'canon' (if we can use that term) of the ten Attic orators would seem not to have functioned precisely in rhetorical education. The selection of the Alexandrian scholars appears to have been based more on language and style than on rhetorical quality (Smith 1995, 77–78). When it comes to poetry, however, these scholars were successful in their selections. They published 'the authors admitted after examination' in critical editions, for which manuscripts were compared, and they commented on them. The authors who were excluded from the list, were not treated in this way and were copied less and less (Pfeiffer 1968, 208). Thus we have to thank the Alexandrian scholars for what we have left of Greek poetry, but complaints about what has been lost should also be delivered to their doorstep.

The emphasis on language as a criterion only increased further. Thus from the first century BCE onwards an aversion to Koine Greek, the default language which had become common in the Hellenistic period, started to grow. Even for prose texts people wanted to return to what they saw as the pure Attic Greek of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Thus we can explain that the texts of dozens of historians from the Hellenistic period, including eyewitness accounts of the campaigns of Alexander the Great, were not copied and therefore were lost. We now have to rely on the excerpts of later Greek and Roman authors.

Greek Biblical Interpretation

My last example concerns Christianity. Once a canon of sacred books was established (this is a story in itself), the phase of commenting on these texts started. People wanted to understand difficult passages, see contradictions resolved and unexpected statements about God explained. For example, why would God ask Abraham anything if he already knows everything? And they also wished to know what moral lessons for everyday life could be learned from the text.

In the fifth century CE, there were already so many commentaries that it became difficult to keep track of all of them. In addition, there were sermons and other forms of literature in which the Bible was explained. Following the example of secular collections of *scholia*—short bits of commentary in the margins of a text—people began to produce Bible manuscripts exhibiting a chain of commentary fragments from different authors written in the margin or between the text. Hence this genre was later called *catena*, which is Latin for 'chain'. In this way one could easily compare the different opinions of commentators on every single biblical verse.

Now often people think of these *catenae* as anonymous collections which continued to grow and were always adapted further without any clear direction. Considering the diversity of the *catena* manuscripts of Genesis, it would be difficult at first sight to draw a different conclusion.

Early on in the last century a number of *catena* types were established, but further progress seemed impossible, that is, up until the 1950s, when a young Walloon researcher, Françoise Petit, devoted herself to this topic. It took her several decades, but in the end she managed to untangle the knot. There turns out to be only one initial *catena* on Genesis. In addition, there appears to be an anthology of commentary tracks grouped around the comments of one of them instead of around the Bible. Those two collective works have in the course of time become mixed up: the original *Catena on Genesis* was supplemented with material from the other collection, and vice versa. Petit was thus able to draw a family tree of the tradition (Petit 1991–96 and 1996).

Now that it is clear that the *Catena on Genesis* goes back to one single basis, it is also possible to say something about the compiler. I have sometimes even called him the 'author'—not because he has written an original and highly personal work, but because he was someone who made choices and thus to a certain extent gave the work a particular identity. Now according to Petit, the compiler, let us call him the *catenist*, was the most honest and liberally spirited person we can imagine (Petit 1996, 244–45, 253). And indeed, the honesty makes sense. The catenist often stopped copying text for his fragments at points where we would have liked to read on, but in general he changed nothing in the actual text which he quoted. And he usually mentioned the author by name.

The liberal spirit is another story, I am afraid. I am inclined to take a slightly different position from that of Petit. She points out that the catenist was not really a partisan of a particular school of exegesis. At that time, protagonists of a historical explanation strongly opposed defenders of allegorizing interpretations of the Bible (who offered explanations along these lines: the Song of Songs is not about the love between a king and his bride, but about Christ and his Church). Now indeed the catenist quoted representatives of both directions. He even cites Jewish interpreters like Philo and Josephus, even though later copyists transformed the former into 'Philo the bishop'. According to Petit the goal of the catenist was to hand down the exegetical tradition in its plurality and to allow a comparison of different interpretations. It would be a mirror of ancient biblical interpretation.

Now if one looks at the works cited, it is striking that interpreters known for their allegorizing interpretation are quoted for the works in which they also offer literal interpretations. This could still be explained on the basis of their availability in the library where the catenist worked. However, a study of the selected fragments themselves shows that they stop right there where the allegorical interpretation begins. This must have been the catenist's choice. Are the proponents of historical interpretations better off in this respect? Not always. One of them, Theodore of Mopsuestia, occasionally spoke about his views on the two natures of Christ. Precisely on that issue there was a major dispute in the fifth century. And indeed, the catenist stopped copying his fragments as soon as Theodore started talking about the natures of Christ.

The compiler of the Catena on Genesis apparently had little appetite for allegorizing explanations, nor did he want to spread Theodore's two-nature doctrine. Now either the catenist did not share Theodore's position, or he thought this was not a topic for the text genre chosen.

Both explanations are possible. To illustrate the second option: these kinds of collections of commentary fragments already had the function of school text books for the followers of the ancient Graeco-Roman religion. In the curriculum of the grammarians, allegorizing interpretation was considered something that did not belong there. A text had to be interpreted on the basis of the text itself, by comparing text passages and logical reasoning: one has to 'explain Homer on the basis of Homer'. Allegorizing explanation was like cheating. It was also more suited to the philosophical schools, in which this kind of explanation was applied to very specific text, that is, to myths. And that the Bible was meant as history rather than as mythology, Porphyry, a fearsome opponent of Christianity, had already pointed out. Thus it has been suggested that the catenist might have seen the passages on the natures of Christ as something that did not belong to the grammarians, but was rather food for philosophers and theologians (Westberg 2013, 105; cf. Romeny 2007, 189–90).

Syriac Biblical Interpretation

Whatever the case may be, it is obvious that the catenist made selections based on clear criteria. We can no longer consider these texts disinterested collections of traditional materials. The same applies to anthologies of biblical interpretation in Syriac Christianity. In each case we have to see what the selection criteria may have been. I have been able to demonstrate that the West Syriac compiler of an early seventh-century collection preserved in a London manuscript wished to present as many comments as possible from Greek interpreters of his own doctrine in a Syriac translation. Two centuries later, partly because of the advent of Islam, the Greek fashion was over. Now in his anthology a new compiler tried to give the impression that he was presenting real Syriac exegesis. The Greek authors who were once fashionable are hardly mentioned (Romeny 2006; note that the situation in an East Syriac author like the Catholicos-Patriarch Timothy I is different: Van Rompay 2000). However, they remain present in his work, as the Syriac commentaries produced in the intervening years had incorporated many of their ideas. More about Syriac comments and anthologies will follow in the next lecture.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this presentation, it is only right to note that the written and material heritage which has survived from ancient times is limited by all kinds of factors. Coincidence plays a huge role. Thus we happen to have for Syrian Christian literature quite a number of fifth- and sixth-century manuscripts. This is an amazing situation, if one considers that most Greek and Latin manuscripts are not much older than the tenth century. That we still have these old manuscripts is almost entirely due to the fact that a tenth-century bibliophile abbot of a Syrian monastery in the Egyptian desert was complaining about a new poll tax (Brock 2004). He had to submit his complaint to the caliph himself in Baghdad, and while he was waiting for his audience with the caliph, he acquired many ancient manuscripts in the region, which he then took with him to Egypt. There they were preserved by the particular climatic condition of the Nitrian desert and the fact that they could in this way escape the many wars in Syria and Iraq.

Unfortunately even now wars are raging in the Middle East. Often heritage is destroyed unwittingly. Thus tank commanders in World War II used the Behistun inscription, high up in the rocks in Iran, as a target for shooting practice. Luckily they were not good shots. However, we also see deliberate destruction of heritage, often designed permanently to erase the presence of groups of people. We are proud that we have here at the VU in the collections of the Paul van Moorsel Centre and the Peshitta Institute material from the Middle East that documents precisely the diversity of the area, even though it is no longer preserved there.

In this public lecture I focused on forms of loss of knowledge of which the impact is often overlooked, that is, loss of knowledge as a result of choices made by those who intended to preserve and hand down their heritage—in agnotological terms: ignorance as a passive construct. We have seen that the criteria for what they selected and what not are not always so obvious. Sometimes the borderlines between groups are reinforced by making selections on assumptions of what the authentic language or culture of the community would be, but often practical and educational purposes also play a role. It is important, I think, to be more aware of this.

Debt of Thanks

Having come to the last part of this lecture, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Executive Board of the University and the Board of the Faculty of Humanities for my appointment. I greatly appreciate the trust placed in me. You have appointed someone who has not followed the standard curriculum for ancient historians, but you saw that with my training I could very well serve the broad vision of Antiquity propagated by this university, a vision in which the study of the Graeco-Roman world and of the ancient Middle East are combined.

Professors Van Rompay and Van der Kooij, highly esteemed supervisors, I have already been allowed to address you at a previous similar opportunity. Then we could not foresee that I would have an opportunity to do this again. It was not really the intention either. But for me, it has worked out very well. In my daily work here, I still build on the strong foundations of the training that you gave me. I am also very grateful for all the support given over the years. With the arrival in Amsterdam of the Peshitta Institute and the Paul van Moorsel Centre for Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East an important Leiden tradition with a history of 440 years is now grafted onto Amsterdam's trunk and continues to flourish in a new and broader context.

Professor Van der Spek, you developed the Ancient Studies programme at this university, now more than thirty years ago, which was a major innovation. You realized that it was not possible to study the ancient world without involving both texts and material culture. And you realized that it is not good to study Antiquity only from a Graeco-Roman point of view or only looking at the East. You have pushed this nineteenth-century dichotomy aside. By breaking down these two walls you made room for an interdisciplinary study of Antiquity, which is the only way forward for our field. I consider it an honour to continue also this tradition.

Drs Flinterman, Kleber, and De Boer, I consider it a great privilege to be working with three such skilled and dedicated colleagues. I am also very grateful to you for the warm way in which you have received me in our section.

Professor Legêne and colleagues of the Department of Art & Culture, History, Antiquity, when people ask me what I think of my new job, the first thing I mention is the good and natural cooperation on the fourteenth floor. I know of no other place in the Netherlands where archaeologists, classicists, historians, and orientalists are so closely connected in education and research, and I am confident that there will be more and more fruitful links with the media, art, and design section as well.

Historians of religion, earlier today we launched the Amsterdam Centre for Religious History (www.acrh.nl). Whilst in these two lectures this afternoon we move from Babylon to Byzantium, the new centre spans all the centuries from Babylon to the Bible Belt. I look forward to this new partnership, which also brings the Faculties of Theology and Humanities closer together.

Colleagues from the University of Amsterdam, in ACASA, the Amsterdam Centre for Ancient Studies and Archaeology, we are cooperating in offering the Master's programmes in ancient studies and archaeology. Next year we shall also be teaching joint Bachelor's programmes. I am convinced that this will considerably strengthen the interdisciplinary approach to Antiquity mentioned before and I am looking forward to teaching even more classes together.

Dear members of the Fitting In/Standing Out project and other PhD students who came with me from Leiden, we have been through a lot together. I am most grateful to you all for your patience, your support, and the willingness to move with me to Amsterdam. I enjoy working with you every day.

Graduate students and undergraduates, whether in the context of the History programme or of Ancient Studies, I hope you will take advantage of the possibilities that Amsterdam offers for the study of Antiquity in a broad geographical and methodological perspective. I will be glad to assist you in this. It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to work with you and also to learn from you.

Finally, I express my profound thanks to my wife Hagit. Your love and support were crucial in a number of difficult years. Although the ceremony today shows that our work is also some sort of family business, together with our daughters, Yael and Noa, you do show me that there is more to life than just working. It gives me great pleasure to let you have the final say on the subject of knowledge, after the music. This concludes my inaugural lecture.

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